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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: POLICE RAID INTERNEWS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Daniel A. Russell.
Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Police raided the Moscow offices of Internews April 18, confiscating financial documents and computers, and effectively paralyzing the organization's work with media outlets. While officials attribute the raid to an investigation of Internews' staff failure to declare currency upon arrival at the airport, Internews President Manana Aslamazian told us that she believed the raid was intended to send a signal to foreign-funded NGOs working on issues sensitive to the GOR. While Internews requests that the USG not raise its case publicly, the Ambassador conveyed our concerns to Acting Foreign Minister Denisov, and we are coordinating with the EU on other possible responses. Suggested press guidance is attached. END SUMMARY.

Raid

¶2. (SBU) On April 18, officers from the Internal Affairs Department of the Sheremetevo Airport raided the offices of the U.S.-headquartered NGO Internews, recently renamed the Educated Media Foundation (EFM). During the 12-hour search, officers seized computer servers, financial documents, and other documentation, effectively crippling its operations. Internews President Manana Aslamazian called an emergency board meeting on April 19 to determine how the NGO should respond. Authorities said the raid was connected to the criminal case opened against Aslamazian and Internews Director of Development Gillian McCormack for failure to declare cash in excess of USD 10,000 upon arrival at the Sheremetevo II airport on January 21.

¶3. (C) Internews does not seek any public intervention by the USG at this stage. Aslamazian and McCormack have acknowledged the failure to declare the money was an oversight on their part and have been cooperating with the investigation. Both have said that the cash was personal funds, not cash belonging to the NGO. Television network NTV and other Russian media have reported that authorities suspect the cash was being used to pay staff salaries while evading income tax deductions. Aslamazian told us privately that she believed authorities were making an example of Internews as a warning to other foreign-funded NGOs working on issues sensitive to the GOR. Aslamazian added that she had no hint that the raid was coming.

¶4. (SBU) The seizure of Internews' computer servers and its inability to operate will have some effect on the news organizations it partners with. Internews receives approximately USD 2.5 million annually from the USG and was awarded a USD 3.5 million EU grant. It provides training to regional journalists in reporting, as well as the business aspects of managing media organizations. It also produces programming for regional network affiliates and independent stations that touches on social issues such as human rights,

the environment, and other issues not generally covered by national, government-affiliated networks, as well as providing list serves that allow these stations to share their reporting with each other.

15. (SBU) Internews has previously been investigated by the authorities. In 2005, tax inspectors conducted eight inspections of the NGO, finding only a minor violation that resulted in a 6,000 ruble fine. The scrutiny was widely thought to be related to Internews' grants from Mikhail Khodorkovskiy's Open Russia Foundation. Internews has been registered by the Federal Registration Service and has filed required quarterly and annual reports.

Raising USG Concern

16. (C) With Acting Foreign Minister Denisov, the Ambassador raised our concerns that the raid appeared excessive. He stressed that Internews was a legal and registered Russian NGO, equally funded by the U.S. and the European Union. He asked that the MFA pay close attention to the situation, noting its potential to become a larger and more public irritant. Denisov thanked the Ambassador for raising the case, said that he had seen the press reports, and offered that he did not think the raid extended beyond the incident at Sheremetevo. In a separate conversation with the Ambassador, EU Ambassador Marc Franco said that the EU would follow Internews' lead and not raise the issue with the GOR at this stage. Should there be further action against Internews, the EU would be willing to join the U.S. in raising its concerns with the GOR.

COMMENT

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17. (C) Although the raid may be part of the on-going investigation of Aslamazian and McCormack's failure to declare their excess cash, to many opposition supporters and NGOs, it appears that the GOR is intent on intimidating anyone who may be perceived to be acting on behalf of foreign interests. Aslamazian has told us that she believes a strong and public U.S. reaction may further hurt Internews, however, and quiet diplomacy is likely the best course. We will continue to follow up with Russian officials, including DFM Yakovenko, Human Rights Ombudsman Lukin and Commission on Human Rights and Civil Society Development Chair Pamfilova. Suggested press guidance follows.

Begin Text

Q: What is the USG reaction to yesterday's raid on the offices of Internews Russia (recently renamed the Educated Media Foundation/EMF)?

-- The President of the organization failed to declare that she was carrying cash in excess of the allowable limit when a Russian Customs official stopped her at Moscow's Sheremetevo airport on January 21.

-- She acknowledged this oversight and takes responsibility for it.

-- Yesterday's raid of her organization's office appears to be an excessive response to the situation.

-- We call upon the Russian Government to be fair in its dealings with EMF/Internews.

If asked

-- The U.S. Government has supported EMF/Internews for over 10 years in its efforts to train Russian media outlets in

professional, unbiased news reporting and in media business
and advertising development.

End Text

Text and background e-mailed separately to EUR/PPD.
BURNS